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This National Conference on Race and Education, focussed on equal educational opportunities and stressed action rather than research or theoretical discussion. The 600 conference participants included educational administrators, school board members, civil rights leaders, government officials, university scholars, high school students, parents, and representatives of private enterprise. The two most critical elements of the conference related to program strategies and the increasing polarization between conservatives and those who reject gradual solutions. Several comprehensive programs were suggested for achieving desegregation in large urban communities: political alliances, positive programs for social change, changed attitudes and renewed commitment of public school leaders and increased local pressure. However, state power and federal aid were denoted as the most positive steps toward equality of educational opportunity. (EMB)

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Another Look at Race and Education

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In mid-November, the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights sponsored a National Conference on Race and Education: about 600 individuals from throughout the country met to report on and discuss "Equal Educational Opportunity in America's Cities: Problems and Programs for Change." Those in attendance included educational administrators and civil rights leaders, school board members and university scholars, classroom teachers and high school students, government officials, representatives of concerned enterprises in the private sector, and inner city parents. The conference was billed in advance as one that would emphasize action rather than research or academic discussion, and it reflected all the conflicts and tensions besetting the quest for equal opportunity today.

Commissioner of Education Howe gave one of the three major speeches and, while everything he said was consistent with the Office of Education's strong stand in recent years favoring school desegregation, the audience seemed somewhat disappointed. The missing element, perhaps, was the vigor with which he had told school administrators in mid-1966 that the time had come for them to put their own careers on the line to compel their communities to integrate their schools. There was no lack of conviction in the more recent speech, but it is hard to resist reading it as confirmation of the view that the Office has stepped or been pulled back from its earlier position of leadership. Despite the appearance of Commissioner Howe and some of his leading lieutenants, the Civil Rights Commission ran the show without joint sponsorship by the Office of Education. Although bureaucratic rivalries may have been responsible, one cannot help but surmise that policy considerations on one side or both were also involved. "Where is the Office of Education?" was heard frequently at the meetings and in the corridors.

The old conflict between advocates of integration and those who favor compensatory education is far from dead, although Commissioner Howe argued reasonably that we are in dire need of both. The specifics, of course, are what make such efforts meaningful, and there were many pleas for more specifics. One, from a middle-aged, apparently well-educated Negro from an Iowa city, came on the last day of the conference. A layman active in the public school system, he wanted to know where to find competent Negro teachers, how to integrate inner city youngsters in predominantly middle class classrooms, what available textbooks are appropriate for children living in a world where not everyone is white and has a house, a lawn, and a father. He had been promised cooperation by the Board of Education at home if he could provide these kinds of specifics, so he had come to Washington at his own expense to attend the conference. He was leaving, he felt, empty-handed.

Several people expressed the feeling that his criticism (or plea) was not a completely fair one. The purpose of the conference was not, some said, to provide such specifics, although one would be hard put to explain why this kind of help would have been inappropriate. In fact, as a few people observed, the apecifics were available in the commercial exhibits provided by publishers and others, in the Civil Rights Commission's own exhibit, and through formal and informal interpersonal contacts. Some offered their ideas and suggested appropriate resources, and the Iowa gentleman dutifully listened and took notes. It seems likely, however, that little will come of this, and even less for others with similar concerns who were at the conference but not at this particular one of numerous simultaneous sessions. There is a technology involved in obtaining information of this kind that is difficult for the uninitiated to fathom. What may be needed are a greater number of regionally-based federal and state consultants who can stimulate, encourage, and help willing communities to move more quickly and efficiently. The Civil Rights Commission and such independent

organizations as the NAACP, along with the Office of Education and some state education departments, have undertaken to assist when they can, but these resources seem less than adequate to meet the need. In his speech, Commissioner Howe announced the formation of a Division of Equal Opportunity (with regional offices around the country) in the Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education of the U. S. Office; hopefully, this will be one of its major functions.

The conference revealed an increasing willingness, at least among leaders committed to integration, to confront the barriers to the only feasible procedure for achieving desegregation in our largest urban communities: metropolitan planning not limited by present city or school district boundaries. Political obstacles are, of course, formidable--metropolitanization is a dirty word in most conversations with suburbanites. But the boundaries are beginning to appear at least semi-permeable, vulnerable at least in peicemeal fashion to a variety of approaches. Voluntary busing programs, such as the Boston area's Metco with about 650 inner city children distributed among 16 suburban school districts, represent one kind of effort in this direction, albeit one that barely scratches the surface of the need. Increasingly, however, individual suburban school systems are making arrangements to participate in cooperative ventures to educate inner city children in integrated settings and to upgrade educational quality. Some such programs are seemingly artificial first steps, such as exchange visits that may amount to little more than field trips -- like the annual trip to the zoo. More extensive, "live-in" exchanges have also been undertaken, as well as long-term exchanges of students and teachers. One wonders whether such programs emphasize social class and racial boundaries in some ways even as they foster intergroup understanding in others. Beginnings of joint urban-suburban comprehensive educational programming have, however, been noted in the New York City area, in St. Louis County, and elsewhere. In terms of the magnitude of the problem, these efforts are still infinitesimal, but they do seem to point the

way toward metropolitan plans that may become increasingly feasible in the future.

The continuing tendency for many middle class families to attempt to "escape" such programs by moving farther away will ultimately, perhaps, need to be countered through residential "leap-frogging" by minority groups and through housing desegregation. Although progress in this direction seems agonizingly slow, an even more serious problem may be presented by middle class withdrawal to private schools. Clearly, the schools alone cannot be realistically expected to implement the social revolution that our professed values apparently demand.

Educational parks or campuses seem to be regarded as the wave of the future not only in small cities with relatively small minority group populations, where interior solutions should be feasible, but also in many of the larger cities. They have direct economic and educational advantages as well as providing an opportunity for natural desegregation. Pittsburgh and Syracuse, for example, have extensive plans for educational parks, most of which should be in operation by the early 1970's. The emphasis at the conference seemed clearly to be on this kind of long range planning, and herein lay one of the major cleavages between the official and quasi-official school system spokesmen on the one hand and a large proportion of the "grass roots" participants, who were more concerned with immediate attacks on immediate problems, on the other.

Our Children Are Dying, writes Nat Hentoff, and Jonathan Kozol writes of Death at an Early Age. To many at the conference, this is the heart of the problem, and schools being planned for 1972 might almost as well be held for 1984. The sense of urgency, even of emergency, that seemed apparent even in official circles a few years ago has largely dissipated and been replaced by relative apathy among dominant political and social elements and increasing feelings of frustration and futility elsewhere. Perhaps this was the major theme of the convention: it laid bare the increasing polarization between those who are attempting to draw on traditional, orderly administrative and political

processes to move toward equality of educational opportunity and those who are unwilling to accept what they perceive as the sacrifice of the current school generation for promised future changes. The former feel that reality limits what can be done today and that we must, therefore, concentrate on preventing the extension and repetition of current problems. To the latter group, this stance is unconscionable.

Two critical elements emerge. First, the dispute about programs and strategies has tended to take the pressure off the conservative "stand-patters" who are generally satisfied with the current situation. Their battle is largely being fought for them by the "gradualists," since experience suggests that educational projections five years ahead may bear little resemblance to what actually develops. They can afford to be apathetic, it seems, since they no longer feel threatened to the extent that they did a few years ago. The second conclusion that can be drawn is a more immediately ominous one, reflecting the same forces that are emerging in other spheres of civil rights and related activities. Those who reject gradual solutions are becoming increasingly restive, although it is hard to see how the public schools could be integrated and/or made less destructive of disadvantaged children overnight, and they seem more ready to accept extreme, even violent alternatives. The conference seemed able to do little to ameliorate this growing polarization; it did make it more visible and may have exacerbated it by demonstrating how wide and seemingly irreconcilable the gap has become. Nonetheless, such visibility appears to be a prerequisite for effective action.

While it would probably be fair to characterize many of those present as extremists and the large majority as at least to some degree activist, there was little apparent effort to "take over" the conference as had been done at the quite different meeting of New Left groups in Chicago. A few sessions were, predictably, disrupted by angry protests about the focus of the conference on

grandiose schemes for the future, usually by apparently sincere participants whose anguish cannot be easily be ignored, dismissed, or forgotten. Their pain and the sacrifices they had made to attend the conference were real, and they pulled no verbal punches; they told it like it is. The most organized protest movement occurred when a Mexican-American group and its supporters, feeling that they had been ignored, left the conference and picketed the Shoreham Hotel, where it was being held. There was not, however, much overt separatist sentiment, although the undertone was evident.

The predominant spirit may have been that so eloquently and forcefully presented by Bayard Rustin at the closing luncheon. One by one, he pinpointed the realities. Good schools need money that blacks alone cannot provide, so fully autonomous black public schools under black control would hardly be feasible even if they were desirable. Our schools are brutalizing children of all the poor, two thirds of whom are not black, so we need to pay more attention to social class. The period of moral concern was the decade from the mid-1950's to the mid-1960's, while today we are involved in a political struggle. We need to build political alliances to gain the power we seek, not to isolate ourselves from potential sources of support. Political alliances are not built on affection or on trust, but on mutual interests at a given moment. We must make common cause with all minority groups, the labor movement, teachers' groups, young people themselves--perhaps to keep the pressure on--and the like. If we can help to get something we need negotiated into a teachers' contract, for example, it becomes a demand we can virtually forget, depending largely on the teachers to sustain it for us. The goal of the conservative establishment is precisely to separate groups such as these; to the extent that we help to do it, we play into their hands. Our goal must be nothing short of quality education for <u>all</u> American children; debate about whether integration or quality should come first is wasteful, divisive, and drains off energy from what should be our

basic purpose. Bayard Rustin along with Commissioner Howe would prefer, one gathers, to enlist the support of both Alsop and Pettigrew rather than to choose between them.

Rustin had firm words for Negroes and others who reject the dominant middle class white society as hopelessly corrupt, racist, and beyond the reach of normal political processes. He pointed out that it is not the white man's fault that only about a third of eligible northern ghetto Negroes vote. One felt that he blamed this on failures of activists to do what they should be doing to encourage ghetto voting more than on the non-voters themselves. Nor does Negro self-pity seem to him justified since, he pointed out, Negroes <u>are</u> in the establishment--not very far in, but in indeed! The emphasis was clearly on political action, however, and the need for a positive program for social change rather than a series of reactions to events. No longer can the civil rights movement expect conservative whites to forge its unity and build its popular support with dogs, cattle prods, fire hoses, and church bombings. The speech must have been disappointing to many who had expected a ringing excoriation of the power structure and heard instead a charge to political action with undertones of criticism of much of their own behavior. It must have been more than a little frightening to those who had felt that the civil rights movement is on the wane and would not do much to interfere with them any more. But the Rustin speech was the climax of the convention for many who heard it, and it is hard to think of any other alternative to renewed apathy or the kind of violent explosion that would destroy the good along with the bad.

It would be a mistake to say that the conference was a useless exercise, although one cannot really hope to evaluate precisely the impact of such an event on practice. Undoubtedly, various participants would choose to emphasize different themes and nuances. It seems apparent, however, that the fact that the conference was held will prove to be as important as what was said in determining

its ultimate influence. Normally conservative school officials whose communities have made even modest strides toward providing equal educational opportunities reported on their work, overstating the case perhaps, but with real pride in "their" accomplishments. Notwithstanding the fact that they would probably have done nothing without pressure from civil rights groups, they reported the innovations as their own and, for the most part, gained reinforcement from colleagues and from the same "civil rights types" who had caused them so much difficulty at home. Their resolve to continue may have been strengthened. Officials who have not yet moved in this direction may have been encouraged by the recognition given to their colleagues. The fact that so many from the public education establishment attended at all must be viewed as encouraging.

Where do we go from here? The NAACP's June Shagaloff reminded the conference that we have the knowhow; only the commitment to change may be lacking. It was also pointed out that, for the most part at least, the leaders of the public schools will continue to be the people who are there now, and that changed attitudes and renewed commitment must be developed among them. In addition, the three external forces of local pressure, state leverage, and federal aid must be sustained and increased. Nothing short of a comprehensive effort of this kind will enable us to regain the momentum that seems to have been lost and to move ahead with the speed that has become more and more critical.